Fighting India's Girl-Trafficking Trade

By: R. David Harden

It was quiet this Tuesday morning along Lane 11 in the Kanatipuar section of town. The youngest of the teenagers were not yet on the streets. No doubt, though, the girls would be out later in the afternoon, trying to meet their daily quota of clients.

Here, and in similar neighborhoods of Bombay, tens of thousands of prostitutes - sometimes called commercial sex workers - ply their trade for starvation wages.

As a Foreign Service officer, I had the opportunity to accompany two other New Delhi-based public-health officers from the **US Agency for International Development** and several Indian social workers who were tracking patterns of prostitution in this seedy red-light district.

I was to be a first-hand witness to the horrors of the trafficking trade in this south Indian city.

We stepped over the filthy muck near the entrance of the brothel and climbed a steep, dark stairway. The madam waited for us at the top. She invited us into her place of business, knowing that we were neither clients seeking service nor police demanding bribes. From her perspective, social workers dispense condoms and save lives - a business subsidy.

This old woman was no more than a poor, illiterate, former prostitute herself, who now earns a pittance off the backs of the younger generation. She showed us the communal workplace: four old cots, surrounded by molded shower curtains, which lined the 5-foot-wide, 20-foot-long hallway. The madam then introduced us to her "staff" - girls from Nepal, Bangladesh, and remote districts in India, dressed in tattered nightgowns.

Most of these girls came from remote villages when they were no more than 12 or 13 years old. In these villages, per capita income averages less than $ 1 a day. Child malnutrition rates are among the highest in the world, female literacy rates among the lowest.

Poor rural families in the Himalayan Mountains of Nepal, the river deltas of Bangladesh, and the plains of India and Pakistan often place marginal value on girls. These remote villages are the pipelines, the fertile sources of the girl-children who supply the illegal human-trafficking trade.

The girls told us different versions of the same story. Many were lured to Bombay or other cities on the subcontinent under false pretenses. Some thought they were taking jobs as nannies or domestic servants. Others were simply kidnapped, abandoned, or sold by their families. Several were falsely married to local traffickers who stole them

across the borders to big-city brothels before returning to hunt for more innocent victims. In this town, people get rich by selling teenage virgins.

But there is one additional rite of passage into modern slavery. Before young girls can effectively begin to earn money, they are often "desensitized" - gang raped. Those in the flesh trade have found that after this process, the girls are more pliable, more willing to submit to the customary 6 to 10 clients a day.

In Bombay today, young sex workers typically earn about $ 1.30 per client. In theory, half goes to the house and the other half is theirs to keep. But, as in the slave systems of old, the girls really can't keep that 65 cents per client. Instead, they are obligated to pay off the tremendous debt owed to their captors: the cost of transportation from their home village to the brothel, plus room, board, and clothes, all loaned at exorbitant interest rates. With hard work and an unending stream of customers, the girls can pay off their debts in six or seven years of continuous labor. Or die of AIDS.

For most, there is no escape. Even if they could escape, they can't go home. Rural folks don't want former prostitutes in their villages - even if they are still only teenagers.

What can be done?

Last year, the United States enacted the Victims of Trafficking and Violence Protection Act, which provides the first-ever comprehensive legislation to combat human trafficking.

This new law provides funding to foreign nongovernmental organizations to assist in the safe integration, reintegration, or resettlement of victims. This act also requires the US to encourage foreign governments to prosecute traffickers and restrict nonhumanitarian, nontrade-related foreign assistance to any government that does not establish minimum standards to eliminate trafficking.

The United States, along with the United Nations Development Fund for Women, is working with governmental and nongovernmental organizations in India as well as Bangladesh, Nepal, and, to a lesser extent, Sri Lanka to begin to address this issue.

The first step is to research the complexities of the trafficking trade, including the role of organized crime, corruption in local police forces, and the impact of these crimes on victims.

Only recently have governments discovered that human trafficking is similar in many ways to the illegal arms or drug trades. Yet, in each of these situations, it is generally difficult for weak and poorly funded police forces to enforce the criminal laws against wealthy and organized syndicates.

Second, donor organizations and the governments in the region have begun to strengthen local human rights groups by helping them network with their sister

organizations in neighboring countries. Indian civil society, for instance, is adept at organizing and advocating for reform. The strength and best practices of Bombay- or Delhi-based women's advocacy groups in addressing trafficking issues can be easily translated to Kathmandu or Dhaka-based nongovernmental organizations.

Third, prosecution remains a critical element. Simply put, traffickers must be arrested and convicted. At the same time, antitrafficking advocates recognize the need to protect and rehabilitate victims. Some of the strongest and most compelling proponents of reform are the few victims who have escaped the brothels to become advocates in broad-based, mass-prevention programs that describe trafficking realities to potential victims and their families.

Still, the economics of this modern-day slave trade suggest that change will come slowly. As long as there's a supply of poor, illiterate, marginalized girls, and a demand for teenage sex workers, traffickers will find profit in exploiting the daughters of the subcontinent.

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